

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at the White House International Jazz Day Concert

April 29, 2016

The President. Well, good evening, everybody!

Audience members. Good evening.

The President. Welcome to the White House! Good-looking crowd. For 5 years, International Jazz Day's main event has been celebrated around the world, from Istanbul to Osaka to Paris. So we couldn't be prouder that this year jazz comes back home to America. I want to thank UNESCO, its Director General, Irina Bokova, and the Thelonious Monk Institute for helping us to put on this unbelievable event. I also want to thank someone who has been a great friend to me and Michelle: UNESCO Ambassador, legendary jazz musician, and all-around cool cat, Herbie Hancock. And our emcee for the evening, who some people think has a pretty good voice, Morgan Freeman.

In 1964, Dizzy Gillespie ran for President—this is a true story—and he said, "When I am elected President of the United States, my first Executive order will be to change the name of the White House to the Blues House." [*Laughter*] So tonight we're going to do right by Dizzy. We are turning this place into the Blues House. And before anybody calls this executive overreach—[*laughter*]—or some sort of power grab, I want to clarify that I did not issue a new Executive order. [*Laughter*] I just invited all my favorite jazz musicians to play in my backyard, which is one of the great perks of the job.

I don't need to tell this crowd the story of jazz. From humble origins as the music of the Black working class, largely invisible to the mainstream, it went on to become America's most significant artistic contribution to the world. Jazz took shape in that most American of cities, New Orleans, where the rich blend of Spanish and French and Creole and other influences sparked an innovative new sound. By the early 20th century, you could walk down the street of the infamous Storyville district and—maybe as you tried to stay out of trouble—hear the likes of Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver and, of course, Louis Armstrong.

Over the years, the sound traveled and changed: hot jazz, swing, bebop, Latin, fusion, and experiments that defied labels. But its essence has always remained the same.

Most jazz lovers probably remember the first time this music got into our bones. Maybe it was Miles teaching us to make room for silence, to hear life in the notes that he didn't play; or how Herbie could hang our hearts on a suspended chord; or how Billie's voice, shimmering and shattered, seemed to bend time itself.

And for me, that happened as a child, when my father, who I barely knew, came to visit me for about a month. And in the few weeks that I spent with him, one of the things that he did was take me to my first jazz concert, to see Dave Brubeck in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1971. And I didn't realize at the time the impact that it had, but the world that that concert opened up for a 10-year-old boy was spectacular. And I was hooked.

Many have said that they've been hooked as well. And perhaps more than any other form of art, jazz is driven by an unmistakably American spirit. It is, in so many ways, the story of our Nation's progress: born out of the struggle of African Americans yearning for freedom; forged in a crucible of cultures, a product of the diversity that would forever define our Nation's

greatness; rooted in a common language from which to depart to places unknown. It's both "the ultimate in rugged individualism," to get out on stage with nothing but your instrument and improvise, spontaneously create; and the truest expression of community, the unspoken bond of musicians who take that leap of faith together. There is something fearless and true about jazz. This is truth-telling music.

Jazz is perhaps the most honest reflection of who we are as a nation. Because after all, has there ever been any greater improvisation than America itself? We do it in our own way. We move forward even when the road ahead is uncertain, stubbornly insistent that we'll get to somewhere better and confident that we've got all the right notes up our sleeve.

And that's what's attracted a global audience to this music. It speaks to something universal about our humanity: the restlessness that stirs in every soul, the desire to create with no boundaries.

"Jazz is a good barometer of freedom," Duke Ellington once said. No wonder it has such an outsized imprint on the DNA of global music. It has spread like wildfire across the world, from Africa to Asia. And jazz blended with the bossa nova of Brazil or the tango of Argentina—which, from here on out, I will endeavor to appreciate as a listener and observer, rather than as a dancer. [Laughter] It can be heard in—on the Scottish bagpipe, on the Indian sitar. It opened up new exchanges with classical music and with Eastern music, and it can make the oldest folk songs sound new.

Jazz. It's always been where people come together, across seemingly unbridgeable divides. And here at home, before schools and sports, it was jazz that desegregated. Because for so many players, the only thing that mattered was the music.

The same was true around the world. I was recently in Cuba, the first American President to make that trip in 88 years. And in Havana, you can hear the beautiful sounds of Afro-Cuban jazz and that unlikely marriage of cultures that, a century later, still captivates us. We hope this music will lead to new avenues for dialogue and new collaborations across borders. And if we can keep faith with that spirit, there's no doubt that jazz will live on for generations to come.

So let me stop talking. We've got an all-star lineup of artists from around the country and around the world. Is everybody ready? Let's do this thing. Jazz at the Blues House.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:31 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to actor Morgan Freeman.

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